

Bab edh-Dhra: City of the dead

By Donald J. Ortner

In comparison with the spectacular archaeological ruins found at other sites in Jordan, such as those at Petra and Jerash, the Early Bronze Age site of Bab edh-Dhra is probably one that only an archaeologist could be impressed with — at least at first glance.

However, as the ancient history of the people who lived there begins to emerge from the painstaking excavations, as well as from the research in the offices and laboratories of the scholars studying the site, the importance of Bab edh-Dhra becomes more obvious.

My own interest in the site began in 1974, when I was invited to be responsible for the research on the human skeletons being excavated in the large cemetery just south of the town ruin. Much can be learned about the biological history of human groups through the study of the skeletal remains, and such data often clarifies problems in the cultural history of a site.

The Early Bronze Age (third millennium B.C.) in the Near East was a critical time period in human history, when urban living was spreading and cities were becoming a more common feature of society.

Living in cities created a significant challenge to the people who adopted this way of life. The challenge was particularly serious in human biological history, since city living posed many new health problems.

Infectious diseases, for example, were a much more serious threat to life and health than was the case in nomadic-pastoralist societies.

A major component of my own research on that time period is a study of the human skeletal remains for evidence of infectious and other diseases and the effect of these maladies on the early city dwellers.

The history of Bab edh-Dhra begins about 3200 B.C., although its proximity to a perennial water supply must have made the area important long before that.

The emergence of Bab edh-Dhra as a small city is an extension of the earlier development of urban living, which flourished in

the great centres of civilisation in Mesopotamia and Egypt and in localised centres in other areas of the Near East. But even earlier experiments in urban living occurred in other areas, such as the Neolithic sites of Jericho in the Jordan Valley and Beidha near Petra.

The site of Bab edh-Dhra is located in a plain that rises gently from the southeastern shores of the Dead Sea. At first glance, the region appears to be forbidding desert; however, today it contains the town of Mazra, whose inhabitants depend to a very great extent on farming for their livelihood.

Approaching the site before dawn, as one typically does during a dig, the plain is dotted with the early morning fires of Bedouin camps. These modern nomads probably preserve many aspects of the ancient nomadic-pastoralist way of life which characterised the earliest settlers of Bab edh-Dhra. More recently, as part of the development of a potash industry nearby, a new town has been built about one kilometre south of Bab edh-Dhra for workers of the plant.

In ancient times, Bab edh-Dhra was the northernmost of five towns; each within signalling distance of at least one of the other towns (about ten kilometres). The date and location of these five sites has led to speculation that they may be the ruins of the fabled biblical cities of the plain, which included the legendary cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Who were the people of Bab edh-Dhra? What was their relationship to other cities and centres of civilisation? What were the people like? How did they live? What did they die from? These and many more questions provide the stimulus for interest in the site by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, the American Schools of Oriental Research, and the international team of scholars who are excavating there as part of a long-term programme directed by two American archaeologists, Drs. Walter Rast and Thomas Schaub.

The Early Bronze Age of Bab edh-Dhra is subdivided into phases, which correspond to significant changes in artifacts found at the site. Initially, during the phase

known as the Early Bronze IA (3200 to 3050 B.C.), the people of Bab edh-Dhra lived in temporary campsites sheltered within a short walk of the wadi (valley).

The lack of protective walls at this stage suggests a relatively peaceful existence which was based on nomadic-pastoralism. The pottery of this initial period appears to be rather unique to Bab edh-Dhra, although there are artifacts (such as alabaster maceheads found in some tombs) that indicate some economic ties with Early Dynastic Egypt.

One of the fascinating archaeological features of this early time period is the tombs. Bab edh-Dhra is located on what was, thousands of years before the early Bronze Age, the floor of a vast body of water known to geologists as Lake Lisan.

Ancient lake bottom deposits were formed by the annual flow of silt from the high plateaus that surrounded Lake Lisan. Many of these deposits consist of fine, alternating Lisan marl.

At the time of Bab edh-Dhra, Lake Lisan had long since shrunk to roughly the current borders of the Dead Sea, creating the plain on which the people lived and built the town.

The relatively soft marl deposits were the preferred material for making the tombs. Tomb cutters would dig a circular shaft about one metre in diameter, extending down from the surface as much as three metres. This shaft would, typically, expose the location of the marl layers, which made a safe and structurally sound material for the tomb chambers which were dug into the marl. The chambers were dome-shaped with a diameter of about two metres and about one metre high at the centre. A typical tomb had a central shaft with four chambers radiating off its base.

Our excavations provide an idea of just how much effort was expended in preparing the tombs. It took one skilled man and two assistants about three days to clear the central shaft.

If we found a chamber filled with silt, an additional three days were needed to clear it. This indicates that a typical tomb with four chambers would have taken three people about 15 days to dig.

Since each tomb held about 12 burials, and probably some 250 people were buried each year, about 20 new tombs per year were needed — thus requiring 300 hours of work by three people.

This represents a considerable time investment, to which must be added the time and economic resources needed for the burial gifts and other aspects of the burial ceremonies.

A nomadic-pastoralist subsistence is suggested by the fact that most of the burials in the chambers were secondary; that is, the bodies had been buried elsewhere first.

Subsequently, the bones were dug up and brought to Bab edh-Dhra for final burial in the specially prepared tomb chambers. Such a burial tradition fits well with a nomadic way of life, in which most people would die away

from the family of tribal homeland. Carrying a whole body back to the cemetery would pose virtually insurmountable difficulties for a nomadic people. It would be much more effective to bury the dead where they died, mark the grave for future identification, and a few weeks to a few years later remove the bones. Without the soft tissue, the bones could be returned with minimal problems to the cemetery at Bab edh-Dhra for the burial ceremony and final interment in one of the shaft tombs.

Some of the skeletons had parts missing and some were broken in antiquity. The latter suggests fairly fragile bones at the time of final burial, a condition indicating that they remained for at least a year or two in the primary burial phase. It is possible that a given tomb was the property of a family and reserved for family members. It is, however, certain that at least some tomb chambers were emptied and reused for new burials.

In other cases, earlier burials were disturbed and the remains scattered by subsequent interments. Woven grass mats were found on the chamber floor under the skeletons, which were often covered with a cloth shroud.

The chambers also contained gifts, including special pottery, food offerings, and objects that may have been used by the deceased during life.

The bones of a gazelle with one of its fore and hind limbs missing was found at the base of one of the shafts and suggests a ceremony at the time of burial, in which part of the animal was eaten and the rest buried.

Other evidence of food offerings in the tomb chambers includes grape seeds, and the dried remains of prepared food inside a sealed jar.

The use of shaft tombs and campsites shelters lasted for about 150 years. After this period, in a phase known as Early Bronze IB (3050 to 2900 B.C.), new forms of pottery and burial patterns emerged. Shaft tombs continued in use for a while longer, but circular burial or charnel houses constructed of mudbrick began to appear.

These early charnel houses varied in size, but typically contained many more burials than found in a shaft tomb. Furthermore, typical burial in the charnel house was at the time of death and not a second interment. As additional bodies were placed in the charnel house, earlier burials and tomb gifts would be pushed to the periphery of the chamber, mixing and occasionally breaking the bones and pottery.

These burial sites also appear to have been the target of periodic vandalism. Apparently as raiding parties would attack Bab edh-Dhra, the raiders would burn the wood and grass roofs of the charnel houses. As the burning roof collapsed, it would burn and char the objects and burials inside, and the intensity of the heat in some cases caused the bones to deform. One of the very interesting re-



Removing the blocking stone from one of the chambers of a shaft tomb.

unclear, although a rather generalised abandonment of cities occurred throughout the region at about the same time.

Among the possibilities suggested have been warfare, drought, disease or perhaps an ancient energy crisis as the local firewood was used up.

From the vantage point of 5,000 years later, a natural and often asked question is why did the ancient inhabitants of Bab edh-Dhra expend such prodigious efforts to honour and care for their dead.

Thus far there are no written records at Bab edh-Dhra, so we can only make inferences based on the physical evidence and similar practices in other areas and times where we have more information. Elaborate burial practices are almost always associated with a concept of life after death. The food offerings placed with some of the burials support the likelihood of such a belief. Most tomb gifts, primarily pottery, are of ex-

ceptional quality and indicate great respect for the dead.

Interestingly, however, one finds occasional crudely made pots, suggestive of a gift made by a child. Perhaps it was made by the deceased during childhood or by a young relative of the deceased as a special personal gift of respect.

Such finds, even though we can not be absolutely certain of their significance, make the study of tombs and their contents more than just a dry scholarly exercise. They often give us insight into how these early people felt, how they reacted to sorrow, and in many ways provides a link between ourselves and people who 5,000 years ago faced problems and challenges similar to ours today.

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— Jordan Magazine



Examination of skull injuries shows they were inflicted by an ax or sword, suggesting an increase in warfare.

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